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ABSTRACT

This study of book reviews takes an objective look at the major sources that review children's books. Periodicals examined are Booklist, Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, Horn Book, New York Times Book Review, and School Library Journal. Presented in a series of eight tables, the report examines reviews of 30 titles published between 1972 and 1974 and compares the results with a sample of ten books from 1979. The tabulations by source include percent of sample titles reviewed, percent of juvenile publishing reviewed, mean number of days after publication that reviews appeared, mean number of words per review, mean number of different people writing reviews, mean number of critical themes per review, percent of reviews commenting on audience appeal, and percent of reviews referring to other books and authors. (RAA)

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A Comparative Analysis of Juvenile Book Review Media

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Whether you consider the selection of library collections based on the use of reviews to be highly desirable, or a questionable substitute for actual examination of materials, chances are that those of you who are involved in selection are highly dependent on those reviews. Therefore, it is important to know what you are getting. The study being reported on was an attempt to take an objective look at the performance of major sources that review children's books. Periodicals examined were Booklist, Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, Horn Book, New York Times Book Review and School Library Journal.

A random sample of 30 titles was taken from the 1972, 1973 and 1974 lists of Notable Children's Books, an annual listing developed by a committee of the Association of Library Service for Children, a division of the American Library Association. This was a lottery sample, with a card prepared for each title on the lists. These cards were thoroughly scrambled, and thirty titles drawn. Reviews for the titles were then identified, primarily through Book Review Index. Reviews were gathered and analyzed, and the resulting data summarized.

Most of the study is more fully reported in the Spring 1980 School Media Quarterly. This paper reviews that study,

TABLE 1

PERCENT OF SAMPLE TITLES REVIEWED

	1972-1974 (N=30)	1979 (N=10)
BULLETIN OF THE CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S BOOKS	97%	50%
BOOKLIST	93	90
SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL	93	100
HORN BOOK	77	80
NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW	57	40

TABLE 2

PERCENT OF JUVENILE PUBLISHING OUTPUT REVIEWED

	1972-1974 (N = 7160)	1979 (N = 2623)
SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL	95%	96%
BOOKLIST	40	*
BULLETIN OF THE CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S BOOKS	32	33
HORN BOOK	17	17
NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW	13	12

*INFORMATION NOT COMPARABLE

TABLE 3

MEAN NUMBER OF DAYS AFTER PUBLICATION
THAT REVIEWS APPEARED

	1972-1974	1979
NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW	54.6 DAYS	73.5 DAYS
BOOKLIST	64.2	42.3
SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL	80.7	80.2
HORN BOOK	118.6	80
BULLETIN OF THE CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S BOOKS	136	67.2

TABLE 4

MEAN NUMBER OF WORDS
PER REVIEW

	1972-1974	1979
NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW	305.3 WORDS	208 WORDS
HORN BOOK	178.6	185.5
SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL	134.8	161.2
BULLETIN OF THE CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S BOOKS	127.7	135.4
BOOKLIST	113.4	136.4

TABLE 5

NUMBER OF DIFFERENT PEOPLE
WRITING REVIEWS

	1972-1974	1979
SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL	25 (28)	9 (10)
NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW	13 (17)	4 (4)
HORN BOOK	6 (23)	6 (7)
BOOKLIST	3 (28)	4 + 3 UNSIGNED (9)
BULLETIN OF THE CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S BOOKS	1 (29)	1 (5)

TABLE 6

MEAN NUMBER OF CRITICAL THEMES PER REVIEW

	1972-1974	1979
NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW	6.64 CRITICAL THEMES	5.5 CRITICAL THEMES
HORN BOOK	6.3	5.88
SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL	5.64	5.2
BULLETIN OF THE CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S BOOKS	5.24	6.6
BOOKLIST	4.89	6.33

TABLE 7

PERCENT OF REVIEWS COMMENTING ON AUDIENCE APPEAL

	1972-1974	1979
SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL	32%	10%
BOOKLIST	25	44
BULLETIN OF THE CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S BOOKS	21	0
HORN BOOK	13	0
NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW	6	0

TABLE 8

PERCENT OF REVIEWS REFERRING TO OTHER BOOKS AND AUTHORS

	1972-1974	1979
NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW	47%	50%
SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL	46	20
HORN BOOK	43	25
BOOKLIST	32	11
BULLETIN OF THE CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S BOOKS	28	40

and compares the results to the analysis of a sample of ten titles from the 1979 list of Notable Books.

The extent to which each of the review tools covered the sample was determined by simple percentage. No periodical had reviewed all 30 titles (see Table 1), but Booklist, Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, and School Library Journal did all but one or two. Horn Book reviewed three-quarters of the books, the New York Times Book Review just over half. In 1979 the pattern changed somewhat, with Bulletin and NYTBR reviewing half or less of the titles.

However, what of the larger picture, the non-notable books? The number of all juvenile books reviewed by each target tool in 1972-74 was divided by the number of books published in those years, to determine percent of total coverage. Here the results are quite different, although they must be taken with a grain of salt. For example, if a periodical reviewed 1800 books in 1974, not all of those would have been 1974 publications. As long as the total publishing output is fairly stable, these percentages are at least indicative of the general trend. By this measure, School Library Journal reviewed 95 percent of the 1972-74 juveniles, Booklist, 40 percent and Bulletin, 32 percent. Horn Book's coverage was 17 percent and that of the New York Times only thirteen percent. 1979 data showed little change (see Table 2).

Tables 1 and 2 suggest that our review tools are serv-

ing us well in identifying quality books, but that only School Library Journal begins to reflect the total picture of current juvenile publishing in this country.

How promptly do these periodicals review juvenile books? To determine performance in the area of promptness, publication dates for the sample titles were located in Kirkus Reviews. The number of days was counted before or after a book's publication that each review appeared. When there was no date of the month, the first was arbitrarily used. These figures were then computed for each periodical, and the average determined (see Table 3). The New York Times reviews appeared most promptly, an average of 54.6 days after the book's publication. The time lag for Booklist was 64.2 days, compared to 80.7 for School Library Journal. Reviews were much later in Horn Book (118.6 days after publication) and Bulletin (136 days). Only School Library Journal's performance stayed the same, according to the data gathered for the 1979 sample; Booklist (42.3 days), Bulletin (67.2), and Horn Book (80 days) all published reviews more promptly than they had previously. Only NYT reviews were slower in appearing (73.5 days).

Length of review was also examined. Longer reviews were assumed to be more informative, although they may simply have been verbose. The number of words for each review was counted, and the mean computed (see Table 4). The range was from 305.3 words in the New York Times Book Review to

113.4 in Booklist. 1979 data showed a narrower range: from a 208 word mean for NYTBR reviews to 135.4 words in Bulletin.

Who writes the reviews? How many reviewers are involved? Authorship of reviews is easily determined, since reviews are generally initialed or signed. Table 5 shows the number of reviewers of the sample titles; the number in parentheses tells how many of the 30 titles were reviewed. The range is quite great, from 25 people at School Library Journal to one (Bulletin). 1979 data are not particularly comparable, since the sample is much smaller.

Perhaps the most significant element examined was the extent to which reviews were critical, rather than merely descriptive. Contents of each review were analyzed to determine the number of critical themes per review. A comment such as "a witty, perceptive book" would be counted as having two critical themes, while "an extremely witty book" was considered to be one theme.

Reviews of children's books have often been reproached for summarizing rather than analyzing. Indeed, some reviews in both samples had only one critical comment, although one NYT review had 28. This was the most difficult element of the reviews to study, because description and evaluation could not always be easily distinguished, e.g., colorful is a description, but it also has a positive connotation.

The mean number of critical themes for the entire sample was 5.63 per review--somewhere between wishy-washy

and probing. The reviews in the New York Times and Horn Book were the most analytical, with a mean of 6.64 and 6.3 critical themes per review, respectively (see Table 6). Bulletin and Booklist were least critical (5.24 and 4.89). In the 1979 sample, these two were the most critical; the mean for the entire sample rose to 5.86.

One type of criticism singled out for investigation was what could be called market analysis: the attempt to predict audience or popularity, e.g., "for thoughtful readers" or "should be a winner." This kind of comment occurred to some extent in all the periodicals (see Table 7), but the 1979 data suggests a lessening of this phenomenon in all but Booklist.

Some reviews discuss a book in terms of others of this author or genre. Such information has been a regular part of reviews in all the tools studies (see Table 8), but was a less common element in the 1979 sample.

Users of review periodicals are encouraged to take a closer look at those tools on which they depend. Everything done for this study consisted of obtaining totals (data were gathered on worksheets prepared for this study), then determining percentage or average. No sophisticated research skills were needed, just time plus access to Book Review Index and the periodicals. The calculator and xerox helped. The result is an objective, rather than impressionistic or unthinking view of an important aid to our work.